

Evaluating Mock Election Activities

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OBJECTIVES


Teachers and administrators should be able to evaluate students' participation in mock election activities according to:

- ★ students' grasp of facts and definitions.
- ★ students' interpretations of the campaign.
- ★ students' own attitudes toward the campaign.

METHODS

The following steps will contribute to a successful evaluation of your activities.

1. Involve students in the evaluation process.
2. Create glossaries and handbooks.
3. Lead classroom discussions.
4. Use a scale system.
5. Write essays.
6. Share results of mock election activities.



As the members of each generation live up to their responsibility as voters, they learn just what it means to be a government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

—Former President
George H.W. Bush

1. Involve students in the evaluation process.

Students sometimes have strange ideas about the purposes of school activities. If teachers will start (and contribute to) class discussions of the criteria to be applied to their work, and if the criteria that emerge represent the results of these discussions, then it is likely that the students will “own” the criteria and that efforts to evaluate the outcomes of the various parts of the project will be part of what students learn. Students rarely know how to judge the quality of their own work. When teachers do it for them, students see the resulting grade, or comments, as coming from an external, not an internal, source. It is to remedy this situation that we strongly recommend that teachers inaugurate discussions of the criteria to be applied to a project at its start and as new parts of the project are undertaken. If this is done, it is less likely that students will see school work as “merely academic” and that the shockingly low correlation between school grades and life success (no matter how it is measured) will rise.

2. Create glossaries and handbooks.

Without an acquaintance of the facts, terms and definitions appropriate to the election process, further interpretation or understanding of the process would be impossible. Of course, if a student’s knowledge of the process stops with facts, language and definitions, nothing much has happened. Such limited knowledge is, of course, superficial. Facts and definitions are necessary but not sufficient.

Here are some suggestions for incorporating this knowledge in a meaningful way. With the teacher, students might develop a glossary of the language of the election process. Some obvious terms to be included are: *candidate, ballot, political party, issue, representative, senator, legislate(-tion), citizen, inauguration, budget, and primary election*. To evaluate this kind of knowledge, students could be asked to match terms to their definitions on a test that included more definitions than terms.

Similarly, the basic facts of the U.S. election process could be developed by the students into a short handbook that included the laws governing who may vote and who may be a candidate at the local, state, and national levels. Again, to evaluate students’ familiarity with this material, a combination of matching, multiple-choice and true-or-false items could be developed, perhaps jointly by students and teachers. (Remember that when writing multiple-choice and true-or-false items, the “wrong” answers must seem plausible to the unlearned.)

One other type of knowledge is relevant here: history. Students ought to be familiar with the development of the election process in the Constitutional Convention, as well as the more recent story of the 20th Amendment and the Civil Rights legislation, since these bits of history have to do with who may vote and since they lie behind some current political tensions.

3. Lead classroom discussions.

As students become acquainted with the necessary facts and definitions, they become able to interpret the campaign. To bring this about, teachers will want to ask leading questions, such as:

- ★ What issues does each candidate tend to stress? Why?
- ★ What ought to be the issues in the campaign?
- ★ What kind of person survives the primary and convention process?
- ★ Why are the Presidential candidates all white males?
- ★ Is the current election process a good way to choose a president? Can you suggest improvements?
- ★ Does the Electoral College conflict with the power of the individual voter?

At the elementary school level, possible discussion questions could include:

- ★ What are the most important things that the President should be working on now?

- ★ Should anybody who wants to be allowed to be President?
- ★ Think of something bad that has happened recently. Did the President want it to happen? (This is intended to elicit speculation on the powers of the presidency.)

These questions are illustrative. Teachers will think of better ones—questions that fit the students they face. The intent of these discussions is to start students thinking interpretatively and to elicit ideas that can be used as criteria by students and teachers in the course of both intermediate and final evaluations.

4. Use a scale system.

An attitude is a predisposition to act toward or away from some referent. A referent is what the attitude refers to or is concerned with—e.g., a course of action, a state of affairs, an object, a sensation. Strictly speaking, words like *beautiful*, *ugly*, *valuable*, *worthless* and other such adjectives are statements of attitude. Attitudes have a direction—either positive, negative, or neutral. They also have intensity. We like or dislike some things more than others. Information makes attitudes more intense. The more we know about something, the stronger, or more intense or caring, are our attitudes toward it.

Teachers will hope that students develop strong positive attitudes toward the election process, as well as toward aspects of the mock election. They will want to know the nature of such attitudes.

One way to obtain this information is to seek the direction and the intensity of attitudinal responses on a five-point scale. For example: The discussion of the X issue by candidate Y was:

1. a boring waste of time
2. not very important
3. neither important nor unimportant
4. very important
5. extremely important

In preparing an attitude scale, write the most negative and the most positive attitudes first, then the mildly negative, neutral, and mildly positive attitude statements. Most of the responses are likely

to cluster around the middle three points of the scale. Teachers will already know of students whose attitudes lie at either extreme since their attitudes (or feelings) and consequent behavior will probably have influenced the whole class climate one way or the other.

In general, a five-point attitude scale is the easiest to prepare and use and is accurate enough for our purposes here. The format of a five-point scale is as follows: strongly negative, mildly negative, so-so, mildly positive, strongly positive.

5. Write essays.

Another form of evaluation teachers will want to use is the essay question. Technology makes it possible for tape recordings of students' responses to be used, as well as written responses. In any case, the quality of the responses can be judged by the students as well as by the teacher. Papers and/or tapes should be exchanged among students for this purpose and the evaluations discussed in class.

Prizes can be awarded for outstanding responses; the most important prize is, of course, recognition. Perhaps a tape could be played or an essay read publicly on a radio station or on the school loudspeaker system. The prize could take the form of a letter of recognition from a prominent person or an object such as a dictionary or a good biography of a major U.S. political figure. Such prizes might also be accompanied by a small sum of money.

6. Share the results of mock election activities.

The directors of the National Student/Parent Mock Election are eager to hear how the project was carried on and about its effects, school by school and for the nation as a whole. It is to be hoped that busy teachers will find the time to let us know. To this end, a response form has been included with this guide. If teachers will send us the form, we will, in the degree that funds permit, respond with a summary (including quoted and attributed questions and doubts) of what has been said by teachers and what we think has been learned.